



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/elt/cct014](https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct014)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Dewey, M. (2013). The distinctiveness of English as a Lingua Franca. *ELT JOURNAL*, 67(3), 346-349.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct014>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# The distinctiveness of English as a Lingua Franca

*Martin Dewey*

Andrew Sewell's (2013) response to a Point and Counterpoint between Sowden (2012) and Cogo (2012), although intended as a critique, in fact quite effectively reiterates several key points made by researchers in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In some respects, Sewell's arguments would not be out of place if written in support of ELF. Reading the article, I found myself agreeing about the nature of language and communication on many aspects, often forgetting what precisely his critical stance was.

Sewell's main premise, that all language use is 'variable, emergent, contextual, and subject to hybridity and change' (Sewell op.cit.: 3), is similarly articulated in ELF-focused publications (see, for example, contributions in Mauranen and Ranta 2009; Archibald, Cogo, and Jenkins 2011). So why does Sewell take issue with ELF and Cogo's account of this area of research? Reading the article, this was not immediately apparent. Sewell's 'non-essentialist' view of language is entirely compatible with an ELF perspective. To a degree, Sewell recognizes this, acknowledging that 'Cogo's response [to Sowden op.cit.] illustrates the recent move away from language features and towards processes and practices in ELF', and quoting Canagarajah (2007: 924), that ELF reflects 'an enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use' (Sewell op.cit.: 4).

From the perspective of ELF research, so far so good; this accurately reflects the approach underpinning our empirical work, which

aims to uncover, describe and make sense of the processes in operation in lingua franca talk [...] not from a position of attempting to 'fix' the language, [...] nor to identify the properties of ELF as a single variety, but rather to illustrate its hybrid, mutable nature. (Cogo and Dewey 2012: 13)

However, Sewell makes several claims to the contrary. He contests Cogo's phrasing, suggesting that her discussion displays a 'lingering tendency to see it [ELF] as a distinct variety' (Sewell op.cit.: 4) and that ELF researchers reveal 'a lingering affection for formal distinctiveness' (ibid.: 5). Sewell's justifications for this are Cogo's comments that ELF is 'a natural language' and that students can 'speak ELF' (Cogo op.cit.: 103).

Constructing a critical argument on the basis of such partial quoting, however, is problematic: it is unlikely to stand up to scrutiny and it tends to give a distorted, unrepresentative account. Elsewhere in the Counterpoint, Cogo is more explicit in her conceptualization:

ELF is not monolithic or a single variety because cultural and linguistic resources are inevitably transformed as they are locally appropriated [...] the fact that spoken communication in ELF typically takes place in more or less changing communities, or, in other words, that stability is not a criterion for defining these kinds of communities, makes us rethink the notion of community and the very closely linked notion of variety. (Cogo op.cit.: 98)

This signals a non-essentialist perspective not only on language but also culture and community.

Sewell's point though is a reminder that one major implication of ELF (as Cogo herself indicates), the need to *rethink* language, also involves rethinking the terms habitually used when describing it. Cogo might instead have described ELF as a 'natural phenomenon' or 'natural communicative practice'. The point she was making, however, in attempting to put the record straight for Sowden (op.cit.) is a fundamental one, namely, ELF is not '*designed* with a precise and planned aim in mind' (op.cit.: 103, original emphasis). But it takes time to learn to speak in a new idiom, something ELF, a relatively new paradigm, is in the process of developing. Perhaps Cogo does occasionally fall into conventional ways of describing English, but this is more a function of the pervasiveness of a structural view of language, something we are still trying to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

Sewell also claims that ELF research essentializes categories of speaker, that when referring to English as a native language (ENL), uniformity is implied and its natural heterogeneity ignored. Ironically, this is precisely one issue ELF researchers have critiqued when discussing how the native speaker and related notions such as 'native-like' have tended to be construed. The need to systematically analyse English in ELF settings is directly connected to a realization that when we speak about English in ELT, this is often in an idealized, abstracted way.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, ELF research sees language as an adaptive, complex system (cf. [Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008](#)).

Variability and dynamism have always been acknowledged in ELF as natural, inevitable properties of all language(s). As [Seidlhofer \(2011: 94\)](#) indicates, '[l]ike any other language, English is a dynamic process, and naturally varies or changes as it spreads'. Seidlhofer is not distinguishing between ELF and ENL, but simply doing what more conservative applied linguistics previously failed to do: extend sociolinguistic description beyond its conventional confines. As she goes on to say of ELF:

... due to its extremely widespread use by speakers from a vast number of first language backgrounds, it affords us the opportunity of observing these processes happening in an intensified, accelerated fashion. (ibid.)

Describing processes as ‘intensified’ and ‘accelerated’ must mean Seidlhofer regards these as existing phenomena occurring in all language using contexts, a point extensively discussed in the field. Sewell might be forgiven for missing this if his reading has not gone far beyond the state-of-the-art review he cites. Yet the point is made very explicitly in the review itself: ‘the formal and functional properties of ELF lexicogrammar involve longstanding processes of language evolution’; a characteristic of ‘all language varieties, including ENL ones’ (Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey 2011: 291). ELF’s distinctiveness lies in the extent and pace of these processes: natural language fluidity is enhanced by speakers’ linguistic diversity, with the normal constraints of standardization generally not that relevant.

Sewell does acknowledge several contributions of ELF: that ‘ELF involves a critical perspective on applied linguistics and therefore challenges “apolitical” approaches’ (Sewell op.cit.: 6); that it is ‘closely aligned with much current thinking about language as a dynamic, emergent, and, above all social phenomenon’ (ibid.: 7); and that the ‘conservatism of language teaching is rightly challenged by Cogo’ (ibid.). It is a pity, however, that much of this is lost amid the critical points. A number of these have some foundation: yes, ELF researchers could probably better signal that learner choice may be constrained by social structures and unequal power relations (though see Jenkins 2007 on attitude and identity in ELF); sometimes we could be more precise in the idiom with which we discuss ELF; and it is useful to be reminded that any claims about ELF, of how it is similar to or different from other manifestations of English, need always to be empirically attested and not overgeneralized (demonstrably the case with Cogo’s data). Unfortunately, Sewell’s critical position is not well substantiated, and is largely misrepresentative.

Finally, ELF interactions often *are* distinctive. Their emergence as a globalizing phenomenon has led us into what Mauranen calls ‘unchartered territory’ (2012: 1). There have of course been other *lingua francas* historically and currently in many contexts worldwide, but these have always operated locally or regionally. Never has a language taken on such vast proportions as a *lingua franca*, not only coming into contact with exceptionally diverse languages but in fact being spoken in more *lingua franca* contexts than ‘native’ ones. This clearly has implications for our continued attachment to ‘correctness’ and ‘appropriacy’ regarding ENL norms. What this means for language teaching needs further examination, but it does present an exciting opportunity to move beyond conventional approaches. ELF research promises to be especially valuable for further understanding communicative effectiveness and, provided we can overcome the constraints of a more traditional structural approach, should also prove constructive for (re)devising learning models and materials. For this to happen we need researchers and ELT professionals to work collaboratively (see Dewey 2012), with research and practice properly brought together in classroom contexts in a way that allows teachers to adopt an ELF perspective when and how they and their learners see fit.

## Notes

- 1 Indeed, Sewell himself betrays formal/structural affection when he bemusedly says 'I have heard speakers claiming to speak ELF, while using language forms that are all but indistinguishable from those of native speakers' (Sewell op.cit.: 8).
- 2 Academic study requires a certain level of abstraction to develop theoretical frameworks and analytical methods. Without forming categories of language use and language user, it is difficult to make sense of the complexities of language and communication. But it is essential that these categories are not overstated, that they are not presented as static or mutually exclusive, especially when attempting to take account of what an academic discipline means for professional practice. It is, of course, still useful to make general points of contrast between the formal and functional tendencies of ENL varieties and the properties of ELF. Making generalizations does not preclude seeing English as dynamic and heterogeneous, and certainly does not mean essentializing ENL or ELF as bounded categories.

*Final version received January 2013*

## References

- Archibald, A., A. Cogo, and J. Jenkins (eds.). 2011. *Latest Trends in ELF Research*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Canagarajah, A. S. 2007. 'Lingua franca English, multilingual communities, and language acquisition'. *The Modern Language Journal* 91/5: 923–39.
- Cogo, A. 2012. 'English as a lingua franca: concepts, use, and implications'. *ELT Journal* 66/1: 97–105.
- Cogo, A. and M. Dewey. 2012. *Analysing English as a Lingua Franca: A Corpus-driven Investigation*. London: Continuum.
- Dewey, M. 2012. 'Towards a post-normative approach: learning the pedagogy of ELF'. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* 1/1: 141–70.
- Jenkins, J. 2007. *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, J., A. Cogo, and M. Dewey. 2011. 'Review of developments in research into English as a lingua franca'. *Language Teaching* 44/3: 281–315.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. and L. Cameron. 2008. *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mauranen, A. 2012. *Exploring ELF: Academic English Shaped by Non-native Speakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mauranen, A. and E. Ranta (eds.). 2009. *English as a Lingua Franca. Studies and Findings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Seidlhofer, B. 2011. *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sewell, A. 2013. 'English as a lingua franca: ontology and ideology'. *ELT Journal* 67/1: 3–10.
- Sowden, C. 2012. 'ELF on a mushroom: the overnight growth in English as a lingua franca'. *ELT Journal* 66/1: 89–96.

## The author

**Martin Dewey** is based at King's College London, where he lectures in Sociolinguistics, Global Englishes, and Teacher Education, and where he provides PhD supervision in areas related to the globalization of English and English language teaching. His primary research focus is ELF, exploring, in particular, the implications of ELF for language pedagogy. He is currently investigating contemporary conceptions of knowledge and expertise in teacher education. He has written and presented extensively on research in ELF/Global Englishes and is co-author with Alessia Cogo of *Analysing English as a Lingua Franca: A Corpus-driven Investigation* (Continuum 2012).  
Email: [martin.dewey@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:martin.dewey@kcl.ac.uk)